

To: Representative John Sinrud, Chair  
House Appropriations Committee

From: YWCA Missoula

Date: February 15, 2007

RE: HB 518

As the director of the YWCA Missoula, I urge you to support HB 518 to provide funding for supervised visitation services in two Montana communities. The YWCA Missoula was fortunate to receive federal funding to establish Planet Kids, a supervised visitation center in Missoula and operate it for at least the next two years. The federal monies came after nearly six years of planning in our community, during which time we identified a great need for affordable supervised visitation and exchange services for families where there's been domestic violence. Missoula, like other cities and towns in Montana had supervision services available through the Child and Family Services department for children who have been removed from the home, and through private therapists for all other families. These services are not accessible to the most of the families that we serve, though, because the children are still in the custody of one parent and because the families cannot afford the \$25/hr or more that private parties charge for supervision. As a result, domestic violence victims and their children were exposed to unsafe visitation and exchange situations because they didn't have neutral third parties to monitor visits between children and their noncustodial parents. We believe this legislation will have a positive impact on the families who are struggling to leave violent homes in Montana communities. Since Planet Kids opened three years ago, Missoula police report a demonstrable decrease in the number law enforcement responses to conflicts arising from custody exchanges.

HB 518 calls for funding for two pilot programs for the next two years. The MBCC will administer the funding and select the pilot communities according to the criteria described in the bill. The YWCA Missoula will not be considered for this pilot funding in the first two fiscal years because we currently have the federal grant, but we believe that it is important to support legislation that could help others in the state provide these crucial services to families in need.

The fiscal note attached to this bill represents costs for two supervised visitation centers for two full years of operations. The first year includes set-up costs, in addition to the general operating expenses. Set-up costs include necessary office equipment and security system features for the center. These are one-time expenses, and so you see that in FY09 the total costs are lower than the first year. In Missoula, bare bones expenses for our supervised visitation center are about \$155,000 per year. HB 518 provides for \$125,000 per center for FY08, and \$100,000 per center in FY09 and beyond. This amount would be

sufficient for communities that are willing and able to match a portion of the state funding with local resources.

What we've realized in Missoula is that without the federal support, our community would be unable to provide these critical services and that children and victims of domestic violence would continue to be exposed to unsafe and potentially violent situations as a result of custodial arrangements. In Missoula, we utilize a sliding-fee scale, and 50% of our clients do not have the resources to pay anything for our services. The amount we receive from the other 50% of our clients represents less than 15% of our total operating budget. Without federal or state support, these services simply cannot be sustained by local communities, as evidenced by the absence of affordable services in our state. For these reasons, I ask you to vote for HB 518 to support services for two other communities in Montana.

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